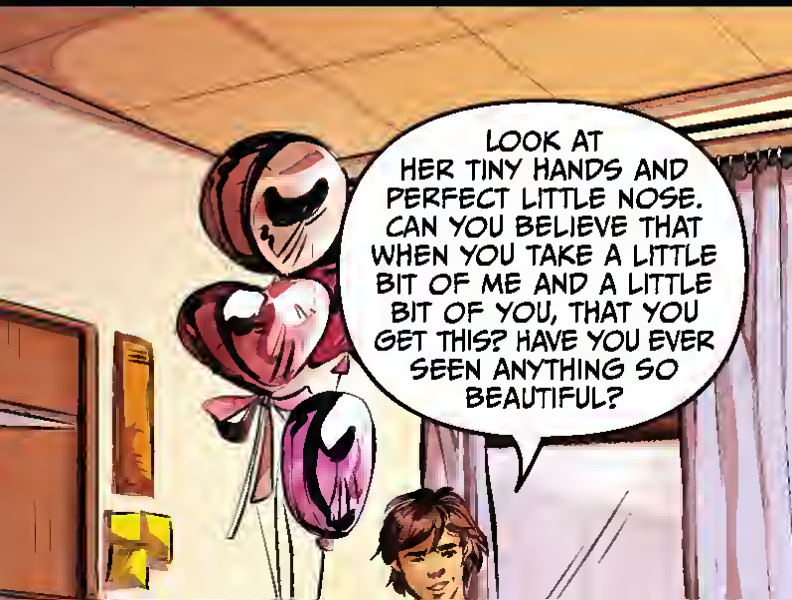
THE PROLOGUE.

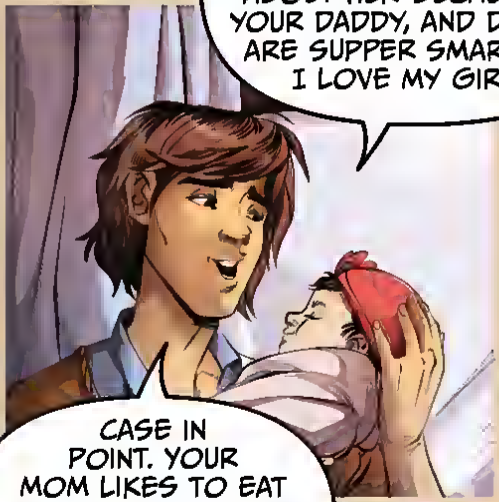

LOOK AT HER TINY HANDS AND PERFECT LITTLE NOSE. CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT WHEN YOU TAKE A LITTLE BIT OF ME AND A LITTLE BIT OF YOU, THAT YOU GET THIS? HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ANYTHING SO BEAUTIFUL?

THE DAY I WAS BORN WAS THE DAY MOM DECIDED SHE HAD TO COME CLEAN TO DAD ABOUT HER "LINEAGE."

ELYSIA, WHAT'S WRONG? SHOULD I GET THE DOCTOR?
NO. I'M... I'M FINE. I'M SURE IT'S JUST RESIDUAL EFFECTS OF SQUEEZING SOMETHING THE SIZE OF A BASKETBALL OUT OF A STRAW.
BUT, THERE'S

SOMETHING I NEED TO TELL YOU... ABOUT ME. I SHOULD HAVE TOLD YOU BEFORE BUT I JUST DIDN'T KNOW HOW.

YOU HAVE A SILLY MOMMY, NATALI. I ALREADY KNOW THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT HER BECAUSE I'M YOUR DADDY, AND DADDIES ARE SUPPER SMART, AND I LOVE MY GIRLS.



CASE IN POINT. YOUR MOM LIKES TO EAT BEN & JERRY'S PHISH FOOD ICE CREAM FOR BREAKFAST. I KNOW, NUTS, RIGHT?

AND SHE FEEDS EVERY STRAY ANIMAL IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD,

CATS, DOGS, BIRDS, EVEN A SNAKE HAS BEEN KNOWN TO SHOW UP ON OUR DOORSTEP AT DINNERTIME.
AND...DON'T TELL HER I TOLD YOU THIS, BUT AFTER A COUPLE OF GLASSES OF WINE SHE TALKS TO PEOPLE IN HER SLEEP. SWEAR TO GOD! ENTIRE CONVERSATIONS.

HMMM... WHAT AM I MISSING? WAIT! I KNOW. YOU LOVE IT WHEN I...
MMMM-HMMM. YES. I DO LOVE IT WHEN YOU DO THAT. BUT...
BUT WHAT?
WHY CAN'T I JUST SAY IT?
WAHHH...

I THINK SHE'S HUNGRY. YOU WANT YOUR MAMA. DON'T YOU, NATALI?

ETORTZEN...

FIREBRAND

THE INITIATION OF NATALI PRESANO

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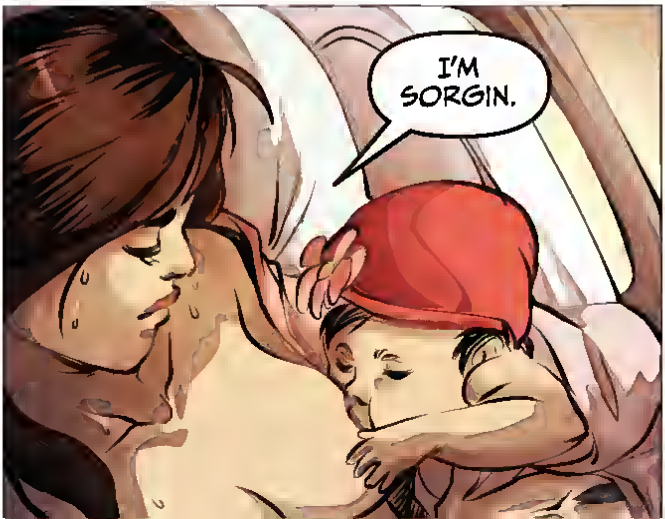
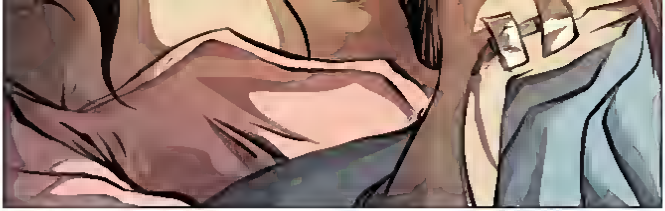
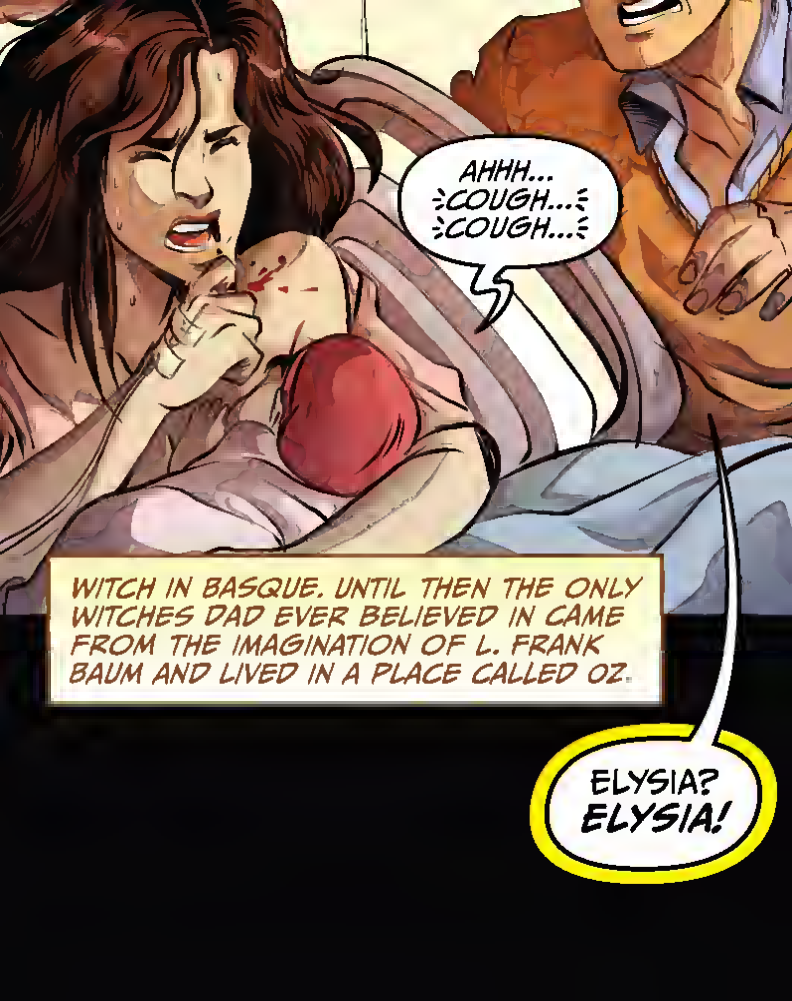




SOMETIMES LIFE THROWS YOU A CURVEBALL.


AHHH...
COUGH...
COUGH...
WITCH IN BASQUE. UNTIL THEN THE ONLY WITCHES DAD EVER BELIEVED IN CAME FROM THE IMAGINATION OF L. FRANK BAUM AND LIVED IN A PLACE CALLED OZ.
ELYSIA?
ELYSIA!

AND SOMETIMES, YOU NEVER SEE THE WILD PITCH THAT HITS YOU IN THE HEAD AND KNOCKS YOU OUT COLD. SEE, THE DAY I WAS RELEASED FROM THE HOSPITAL, MY MOM, ELYSIA PRESANO, DIED.
WAHHH... WAHHHH... WAHHHHH!
NATALI, PLEASE DON'T CRY. I'M HERE. I'VE GOT YOU. I PROMISED MOMMY. I'M GOING TO TAKE CARE OF US. WE'RE GOING TO GET THROUGH THIS, TOGETHER. ALWAYS TOGETHER...

WAHHHHH!

MEMORIES OF MY LIFE PRIOR TO 8 FLASH BY AS SIMPLE, RANDOM IMAGES. LIKE MORNING GETTING-READY ROUTINES...

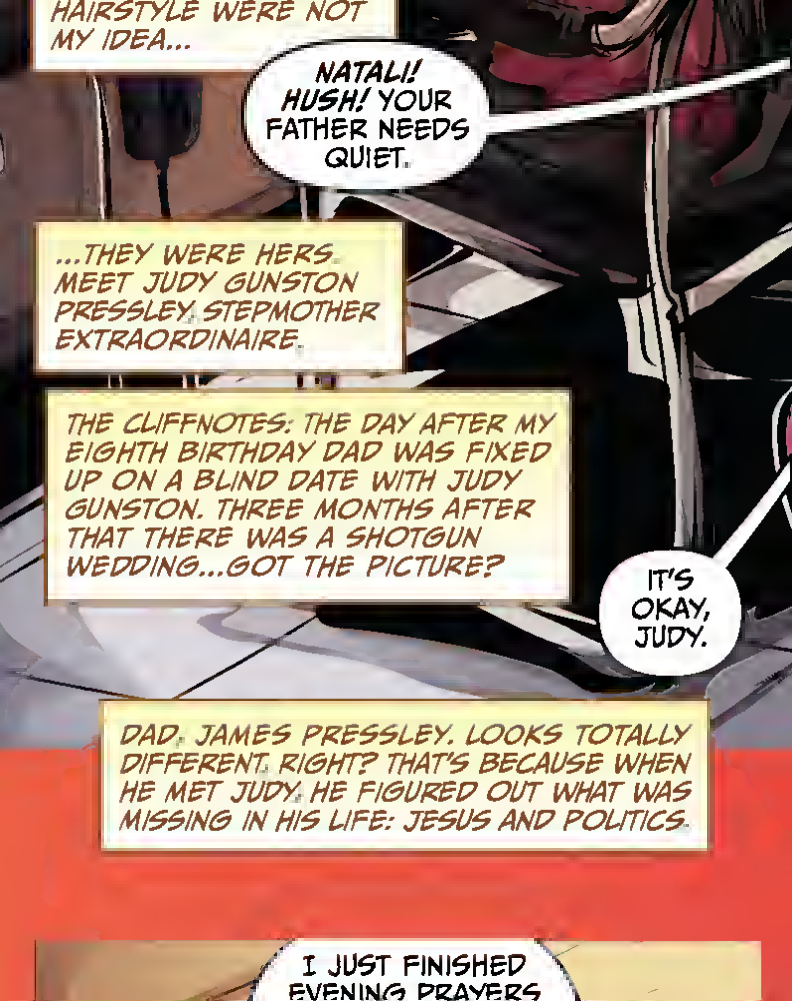
...AND BEDTIME STORIES...

...AND DAD'S HUGS GOODBYE, LEAVING ME WITH THE SCENT OF HIS AFTERSHAVE WRAPPED AROUND MY SHOULDERS LIKE A PROTECTIVE CLOAK. IN OTHER WORDS, LIFE WAS PRETTY GOOD.

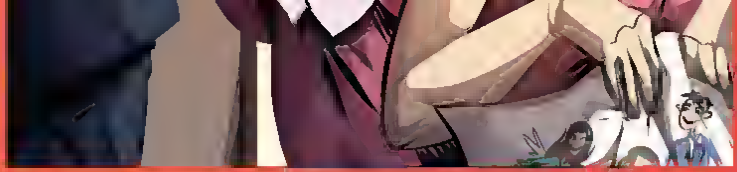
DAD DIDN'T MIND MY LITTLE IDIOSYNCRASIES. OR AT LEAST I THOUGHT HE DIDN'T...

ME. AGE 8. GOING THROUGH MY WANNA-BE-AVRIL-LAVIGNE STAGE. MY MOTTO: ANYTHING THAT CAN GO WRONG WILL GO WRONG.

BA BA
BUM BUM
BA BA BUM BA
BUM BA BA BUM
BUM BA BA BUM
BA BUM BA BA
BUM BUM BA
BUM BA
OH, AND THE DOROTHY OUTFIT AND OLD LADY


HAIRSTYLE WERE NOT MY IDEA...
NATALI! HUSH! YOUR FATHER NEEDS QUIET.
...THEY WERE HERS. MEET JUDY GUNSTON PRESSLEY, STEPMOTHER EXTRAORDINAIRE.
THE CLIFFNOTES: THE DAY AFTER MY EIGHTH BIRTHDAY DAD WAS FIXED UP ON A BLIND DATE WITH JUDY GUNSTON. THREE MONTHS AFTER THAT THERE WAS A SHOTGUN WEDDING...GOT THE PICTURE?
IT'S OKAY, JUDY.
DAD, JAMES PRESSLEY. LOOKS TOTALLY DIFFERENT, RIGHT? THAT'S BECAUSE WHEN HE MET JUDY, HE FIGURED OUT WHAT WAS MISSING IN HIS LIFE: JESUS AND POLITICS.
I JUST FINISHED EVENING PRAYERS

WITH PASTOR RIDER. HIS SON IS HERE TO GIVE YOU THE TEA PARTY ENDORSEMENT. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?
I DO.



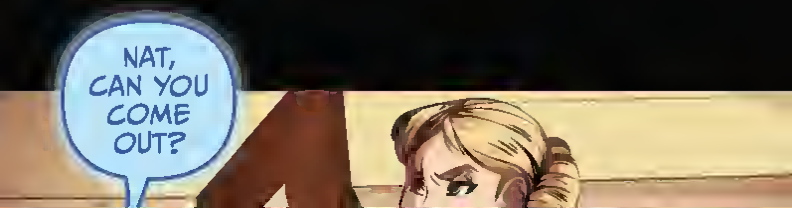
A TEA PARTY ENDORSEMENT MEANT WINNING THE ELECTION. HE WOULD BE A SENATOR. FUNNY THING IS, BEFORE JUDY DAD NEVER CARED ABOUT WINNING OR LOSING. ONLY ABOUT **US**.

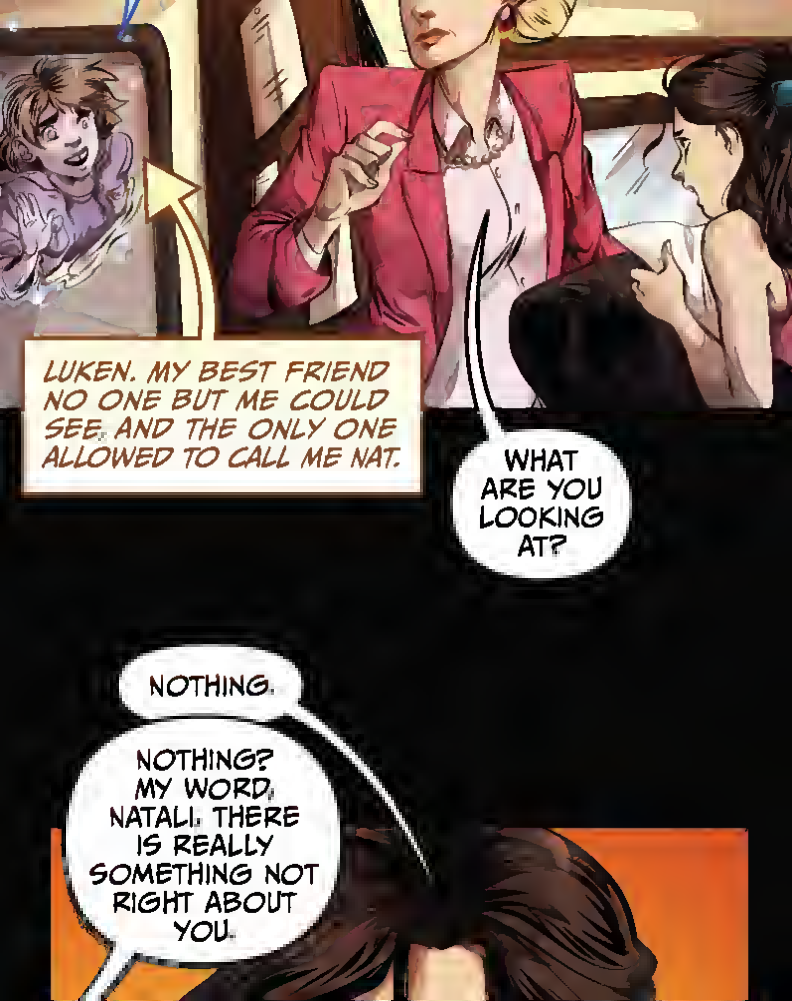
THE LORD HAS TRULY BLESSED US. GO FOR A WALK. READ OVER YOUR SPEECH. I'LL WATCH NATALI.

I'LL GO WITH YOU!

YOU WILL NOT. YOUR FATHER NEEDS TIME TO HIMSELF.
JUDY'S RIGHT, LITTLE BEAN. I'LL BE RIGHT BACK.

BUT HE WASN'T RIGHT BACK...




LUKEN. MY BEST FRIEND NO ONE BUT ME COULD SEE. AND THE ONLY ONE ALLOWED TO CALL ME NAT.
WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?
NOTHING.
NOTHING? MY WORD, NATALI. THERE IS REALLY SOMETHING NOT RIGHT ABOUT YOU.

WHAT?
YOUR MOTHER LEFT THE DEVIL'S WORK INSIDE OF YOU.

SHE LEFT SOMETHING INSIDE OF ME ALL RIGHT, BUT WHY BLAME LUCIFER? REALLY, IT WASN'T HIS FAULT.
THAT DOESN'T EVEN LOOK LIKE ME!

IT'S BECAUSE IT WASN'T HER. AND WAS NEVER GOING TO BE HER. IF DAD HAD JUST WALKED IN AND SEEN HOW SHE ACTED WHEN HE WASN'T AROUND. HOW MUCH SHE HATED ME AND WANTED ME GONE.

BUT HE DIDN'T. THE POET ALEXANDER POPE COINED THE PHRASE, "HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL." IT MEANS PEOPLE CONTINUE TO HOPE EVEN THOUGH THINGS CAN'T POSSIBLY TURN OUT THE WAY THEY WANT. BUT LIKE IDIOTS, THEY KEEP HOPING. I KEPT HOPING.

LEGENDARY